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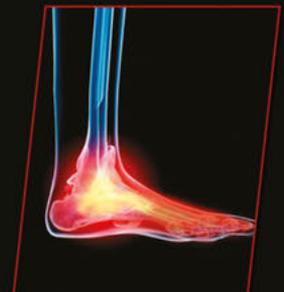
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CONTENTS

August 2017 • Volume 14, Issue 8



6 **Curtains Up!**
There's a world of possibilities open to this CHS graduate.

10 **Answering the Call**
Navarro County's volunteer firefighters run toward a fire.

14 **Everything Old Made New**
At Home With Travis and Holly Ellington.



22 BusinessNOW

24 Around TownNOW

28 CookingNOW

ON THE COVER



The lights are shining brightly on Marc Speed's acting career.

Photo by Memories by Melissa.

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Editor's Note

Dear Readers,

My one millennial child, Katie, has been telling me, the baby boomer, to slow down a little. Taking things at a slower pace, having more fun in the workplace and taking a break for inspired creativity seems to be a trend with the generation born between 1980-2000. I have completely ignored her encouragements, but lately, I've learned of the Slow Food Movement and Slow TV.

We "fast-food" generations can follow the millennials' constant Googling pursuits and learn all about the "slow" movement. I like the slow food concept of eating more fresh produce and knowing what I'm eating, since I'm a fan of local farmers' markets and growing my own little veggie garden. However, I'm not sure I can sit and watch 12 hours of someone knitting or nearly eight hours of a train ride from Bergen to Oslo, Norway, the country in which Slow TV originated!

Anyone want to join me for a "Watch the Paint Dry" party?

Virginia

Virginia Riddle
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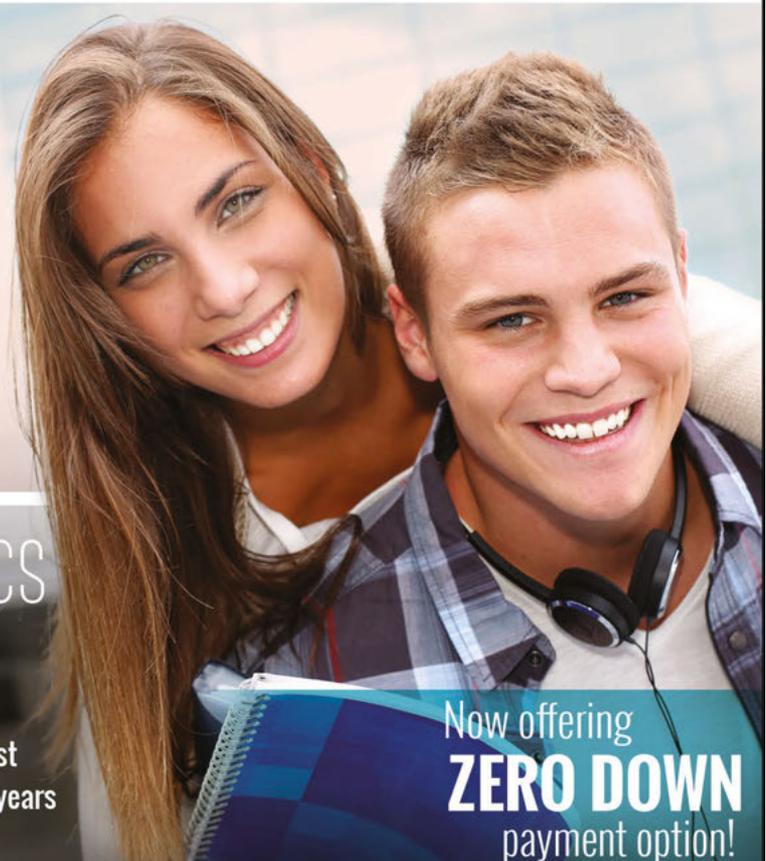
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CURTAIN

— By Virginia Riddle

*As the house lights fade, a hush falls across the theater. The magic of live performances has been part of Marc Speed's world since he auditioned for the Warehouse Living Arts Center's 2011 rendition of *The King and I*. He won the part of Prince Chulalongkorn. "That's how it all started. I knew the stage was where I belonged," Marc said.*

Most recently named as UIL Bi-District Best Actor and to the All-Star Cast at district level due to his role in Corsicana High School's 2017 One-Act production of *The Scottish Tragedy*, which advanced to state, Marc has been busy adding 20 cast and crew credits to his growing résumé. He has appeared in WLAC and its Corsicana Children's Company productions, Collins Middle School and Corsicana High School One-Act plays, a production at the Ennis Public Theatre and productions at a summer theater camp and festival. Theater goers might remember him as a soloist in *Godspell*, the lead in *Pecos Bill*, or Oliver Warbucks in *Annie*. "Daddy Warbucks was a fun role, but the liquid latex makeup and bald caps weren't part of the fun," Marc recalled.

Marc is an all-around actor who sings baritone and can be trained in choreography. "I love musicals. It's a different art because it requires me to be a triple threat. It's much more physical," he explained.

If his name isn't listed as part of the cast, one only has to look a little further through most local playbills to find Marc listed as a crew member. His first technical experience was in *Annie Get Your Gun*, when he both served as prop manager and performed in the chorus. In *Little Women* and *Secret Affairs of Mildred Wild*, Marc was the stage manager. "I can build sets. My study of math, science and physics comes in handy," he said.

Now that he's achieved his high school graduation, Marc can look back while accessing his prior theatrical experiences and mentors who have brought him to this point. "I love that the WLAC and CCC are focusing on the new generation that's not yet sure of where they want to go or what they want to be. Our casts and crews were always very diverse

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— Calico members, football players, cheerleaders — we all could show up and make the company who it was and what it was,” Marc said. He counts Sandra Mahood as his first mentor. “She gave me my first role.” Marc has formed great memories with Jamey Pritchett, Kati Tibbits and Annot Walthaw, as well as Todd Jones, at WLAC. “Todd played my father and still calls me ‘son.’ He taught me what it’s like to love theater,” Marc explained.

During his years at CHS, Marc’s talents grew under the tutelage of the mother/daughter theater directing team of Gloria “Mrs. Mac” and Azure McLuckie. Both McLuckies, along with a former One-Act play judge and CHS graduate, have encouraged him to become an actor and go into education. “Marc can go wherever he wants to go and do whatever he wants to do,” Mrs. Mac said. “He’s fearless and his analysis of a character goes further than he’s asked to do.”

Accepted into the New School of Drama in New York City, Marc is on reserve status for a year while he awaits word on a scholarship. In the meantime, he’s following in his family’s Aggie footsteps and will be attending Texas A&M University-Commerce. “College Station doesn’t have a theater program, but both the Commerce and Corpus campuses do,” Marc explained. Eventually, he wants to earn a master’s degree in acting and directing with a minor in Shakespeare. “I want to professionally act on Broadway and in touring shows and do some film work. I have plans to own my own theater company and direct.”

Through Mrs. Mac, Marc was introduced to the Summer Theatre Camp at Southwestern University and to the Texas State Thespian Festival. “Marc has matured in his last two years,” Mrs. Mac stated. “He’s served as a Texas State Thespian officer, and through that experience, he has learned to be a leader and listen to everyone. He’s now known around the state and nation.”

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“Mrs. Mac’s great. She’s had five UIL One-Act play state championships out of 17 state appearances,” Marc said. A great memory from last year’s One-Act play occurred when the CHS company beat the previous year’s state champions.

Marc loves to people watch and draws much of his characterizations from that habit. “I’m always wondering what people’s stories are,” he said. “I love being able to become someone else and tell their struggles and achievements. I want to give my best, so audiences come to the theater with blank minds and learn something that will be relevant to them.”

He finds live performances challenging. “We’re completely vulnerable,” Marc revealed. A former CHS football player, Marc noted the difference between football and live theater. “In football, the players are still being directed by coaches from the sideline during their practices and games. In theater, we rehearse instead of practice. We become the character, while living in the moment. It’s always new, so when the lights go out and the curtain goes up, it’s strictly each actor who’s in charge.” Marc’s “dream role” would be to play William Kempe in *A Cry of Players*, the story of young Shakespeare in Stratford.

Lifeguarding at the Corsicana YMCA and the Corsicana Country Club, where he was also a waiter, has kept Marc busy during his spare time. He has also started his own photography business. “I’ve learned about lighting, which is another art form,” he said. He’s also competed successfully in a UIL poetry and prose competition.

His parents, Ron and Cassie Speed, have been supportive in every way, as is Marc’s sibling, Matthew, and his fiancée, Madison Nelms. “Matthew watched me play Captain Hook in *Peter Pan*, and was blown away,” Marc remembered. His mom and dad were at the state UIL meet in Austin.

Well-traveled already, Marc will be leaving the old, restored downtown buildings of Corsicana that he loves so much for new theater experiences. He hopes to one day work with two professional actors whom he admires — Hugh Jackman and Bette Midler. In the meantime, Marc takes with him every company and person who’s been along on his journey. “We know we fulfilled our purpose,” he concluded, “and can cherish and hold dear to our hearts the successes achieved.” **NOW**

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ANSWERING THE CALL

— By Virginia Riddle



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- Never burn outdoors on a windy day.
- Cedar burns like gasoline. Plant evergreens around a house, but not cedar.
- Mow grass as short as possible around structures, and keep it watered.
- Don't pop fireworks in rural areas.



Jeannie McCarty, Terry Stovall and Ted Stovall are devoted to fire safety.

CAUTION

CAUTION

CAUTION

Fire can burst forth at any time, ravaging the countryside, consuming people's homes and livelihoods in what is still a very rural Navarro County. From Richland to Kerens to Rice to Silver City, county residents and businesses outside the city of Corsicana depend on their local volunteer firefighters to serve as their first responders. It's a tall order, but the 23 volunteer fire departments of the Navarro County Volunteer Firefighters Association stand daily at the ready. "The association's focus has always been to obtain training and equipment needed to improve the fire service in Navarro County," Jeannie McCarty, association president, said.

The year was 1980. "Kenneth 'T-Bone' Stovall, my brother; Earnest Cook; and myself, representing Kerens, attended the association's first meeting along with representatives from the Corsicana, Frost, Blooming Grove, Richland, Chatfield and Dawson departments," Ted Stovall recalled. By 1981, the NCVFA was chartered. "I had joined the Kerens VFD in 1961 after having been awakened about 2:00 a.m. by a fire across the street from my house. I bailed out of bed and fought that fire," Ted said. Despite his and others' efforts, the fire took a life that night. Just like most volunteer firefighters, Ted and his brother were recruited into



the department by word-of-mouth. “John Seales and Dickie Crawford begged us to join. The department only had one truck that had been built by a fireman in town. We still have that truck, but it’s not used anymore,” Ted added.

Serving in a VFD is often a family affair. Ted’s son, Terry Stovall, serves in the Kerens VFD alongside him. “We’ve got to be crazy to volunteer and do this,” Ted said. “If volunteers are in it for the T-shirt or to look important, they’re in it for the wrong reasons.”

Jeannie serves as the disaster program manager for the Red Cross. “Most of my



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family are volunteers in some capacity. My brother, Pete Ellington, is a past president and charter member of the NCVFA, as is his oldest son, John Ellington. Volunteer firefighters are some of the best people.”

Formerly, volunteers fell under the Good Samaritan Laws, which meant training wasn’t required. Today, each volunteer must have 70 hours of initial training followed by 40 hours of ongoing training per year. “We spend a week of our vacation time from work every year at Texas A&M University’s Fire Academy,” Terry explained. “The volunteers’ expenses while attending are covered by their departments. “The chief of each department oversees making sure everyone is trained, and the Texas Fire Marshals Association keeps up with all the training and establishes the rules and regulations.”

Advances in technology, communications, trucks and equipment and firefighting tools are making the job more efficient, but are costly to VFDs. “Air packs, trucks capable of spraying compressed air foam and heat sensors, are just some examples of what we spend grant monies and donations on. Compressed air foam systems are very important in rural areas because it saves water, which we must usually haul to a fire, but it costs \$30,000 extra to equip the truck,” Terry stated.

While departments want to insure their volunteers’ safety with the use of the latest equipment, it’s costly, too. “It costs us about \$8,000 to outfit each firefighter,” Ted said.

The challenges are great. More members are always needed — as are funds. All VFDs are 501(c)(3) designated and the Navarro Community Fund distributes monies to all 23 departments annually. Grant writing is a constant necessity, as are the usual fundraising efforts of each department — the annual fish fry or barbecue dinners, open houses or buckets for donations at county events.

Rural residents can help in another way by doing things around their acreage that will help prevent fires. Ted and Terry suggested the following: When getting ready to burn a brush pile, plow around it so no pasture grass will catch on fire and spread. Never burn outdoors on a windy day. Cedar burns like gasoline. Plant evergreens around a house, but not cedar. Mow grass as short as possible around structures, and keep it watered. (However,

green grass can burn if the fire is hot enough.) Don't pop fireworks in rural areas.

The camaraderie between firefighters and the different departments is a plus for members. "I have learned so much from this group of dedicated people and have come to appreciate each unique individual and their contribution, and believe me, we have some characters!" Jeannie said.

Under their mutual aid agreement, not only do the association VFDs work together often, but they are supported by the Corsicana Fire Department and the Powell VFD, which are affiliated members of the NCVFA. Additionally, Kerens VFD has a mutual aid agreement with their neighbor, the Trinidad VFD. When tough fires or tough times hit, the volunteers support each other, and tough times are a part of their work.

Ted and Terry cite Black Sunday and the Labor Day that followed as one of their hardest experiences. "For two days, we had grass fires going everywhere across the county, and eight structures burned inside Corsicana's city limits," Ted said.

The worst of times for Jeannie came during the West fertilizer explosion and fire in which Perry Calvin, a member of the Navarro Mills VFD, died. "Anytime there's a loss of life, whether it be someone we serve or one of our own members, it leaves a mark on our souls," she said.

An annual awards banquet is held by the association. "It's a coming together time," Terry said. Individuals and departments are awarded for their service. The NCVFA also meets monthly every third Tuesday at the Red Cross offices on Medical Drive at 7:30 p.m. Robert Slovak serves as vice president and Debbie Watson serves as secretary/treasurer. Membership is open to any volunteer firefighter residing in or volunteering in Navarro County. The association has five standing committees and offers a scholarship to the Navarro College Fire Academy in memory of Sandy Watson, Debbie's late husband.

A lifelong Chatfield resident, Jeannie said, "Time and again, I have seen the people of Navarro County generously pull together for the common good. What can citizens do to help our volunteers if they don't or can't volunteer? Find out which department serves your area, meet the volunteers, tour the station, see their equipment and find out their needs. Help us to help you!" **NOW**



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Everything Old Made New

— By Virginia Riddle



At Home With Travis and Holly Ellington

Meandering country back roads lined with peaceful pastures lead to Travis and Holly Ellington's newly built farmhouse, which sits on 22 acres. The property adjoins family and is down the road from Travis' grandparents and parents' homes. "I'm not very well traveled," Travis joked. "My family brought me home from the hospital to a house just up the road from where we live now, and we brought our daughter, Macy, home to the same house."

"We wanted to build with old things in a newly constructed house. We recognize our heritage," Holly said. Their home represents "pieces of family and friends' history." The family inherited several furnishings, and they like to cruise garage and estate sales. "We enjoy collecting antiques," Holly added.

Holly, a third-generation Corsicana native, graduated from Corsicana High School, Navarro College and received her Bachelor of Business Administration from Sam Houston State University. She developed skills during her career as a former assistant comptroller and bank trust officer and, ultimately, found her home as marketing director for Hand in Hand Hospice.

"I'm acclimating to country life," she stated. Holly enjoys flower and vegetable gardening. The tabby cat and the white Labrador, join free-roaming chickens. Travis and Holly built a playhouse for Macy, who has readily adapted to life in the country. "Macy's a good shot with her BB gun," Holly said. "I've got a photo of her looking just like Annie Oakley!"

Travis was born and raised in Chatfield. He is the fifth generation of his family born there. He graduated from Blooming Grove High School and the North Texas Fire Academy. He apprenticed as an electrician while attending fire academy, ultimately graduating from the EMT program at Navarro College. Travis serves as a captain with Corsicana Fire Rescue and volunteers with the Chatfield VFD. The couple met through a mutual friend who introduced them while Travis was hospitalized following an on-the-job injury, and Holly was visiting a friend in the same hospital. "We were married 10 months later in 2005," he recalled. By



2006, “we had sunk everything we had into this land.” And they had ordered house plans.

Using his “fireman’s engineering,” Travis built the gate and the fence, which lines the county road, out of cedar from the property. While a dear friend was doing some bulldozer work to clear a place for the home, he found a large rock and placed it against a tree. Travis thought to bring the heavy native rock to the gate and set it upright. Holly and Macy have landscaped around it and the fence. “It took a year of working with



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From the first set of plans to sketching out changes, the couple carved out Travis' library. Most appealing to the family are the views from the large front porch, and they love the back porch they screened in. "We wanted it to look like my family's homeplace in Chatfield. The molding matches the Chatfield home's

Macy sweeping the floors." The family wanted to be in the home by Christmas 2016. "It wasn't complete, but we bought two recliners and had a mattress on the floor and moved in the week before Christmas," Holly said.

A spectacular rock fireplace with a mantel created out of cedar from the

friends and family to help to build those 880 feet of fencing," Travis said. The use of the property's natural resources and native landscaping was a priority for this family.

Holly wanted the old farmhouse look. Travis wanted a library, since he loves to read. "I like nonfiction, especially about the military. There's a lot about leadership to learn there," he said. He's especially inspired by his grandfather who served as a paratrooper during World War II.

molding. Lots of detail has gone into our home," Travis said. As a licensed electrician, he acted as their contractor. "We got the plan, the financing, and then it started raining," he remembered.

The family moved into a travel trailer on the land while building their home. "Talk about motivation to get it finished," Travis said.

"We did much of the work ourselves," Holly added. "We spent many Friday and Saturday nights working together, with



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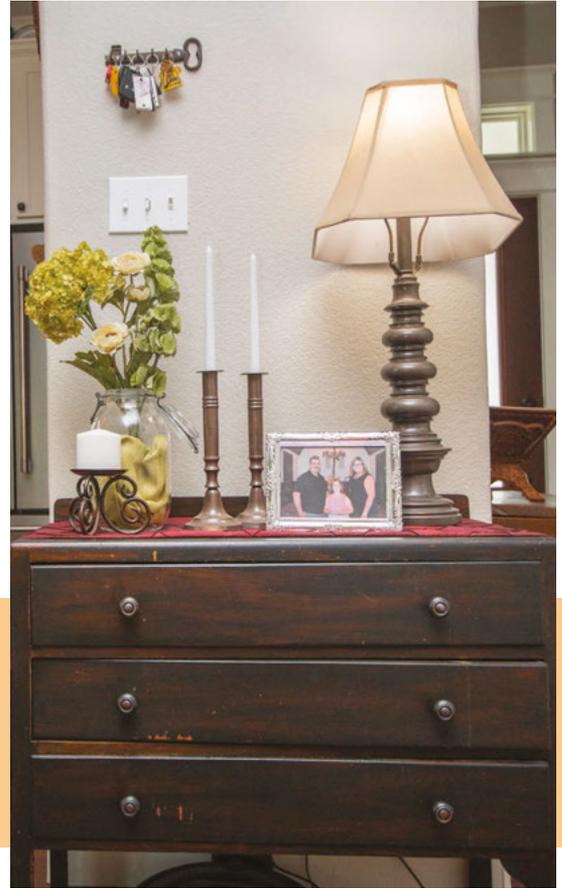
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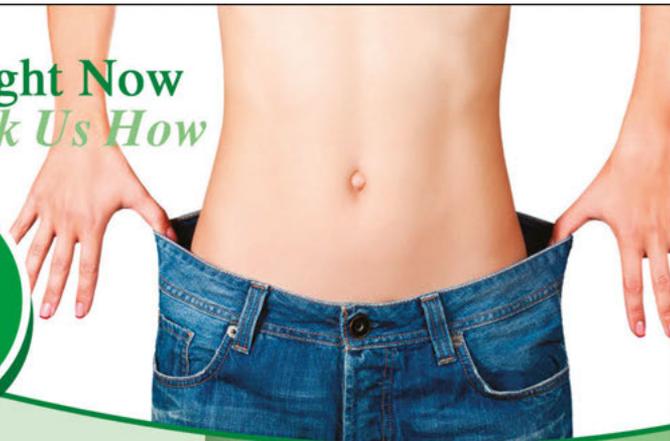
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property anchors the open living, dining and kitchen area with its soaring ceiling. Holly's mom made both the rugged cross and a wreath, which hang on the walls, framed by spectacular views. Macy designed the dining table's chandelier from an antique wagon wheel, metal crosses and blue mason jars. Help was needed when Travis began installing the real butcher block kitchen countertop around the farm sink. "I stained the wood when it was 40 F in here," Holly revealed. Her collection of antique cooking utensils, including her grandmother's ladle, is set above the cabinets.

The hallway to Travis' library also leads to a powder room. Macy, already quite the artist, chalk painted the old mirror and magazine rack. Travis' library has the best views," Holly explained. One wall is lined with beautiful bookcases loaded with volumes. A display of his firefighter helmets and awards hang above his antique desk and typewriter. A picture of John Wayne, Travis' favorite actor, hangs above the doorway. Travis admits to "pickin' around" on his guitar, which is kept in this room.

French doors with transom windows open to the back porch from the master bedroom, which is decorated in greens and browns. The master bath is "totally retro" with vintage medicine cabinets, a chandelier over the vessel tub and the shower with white marble tilework. "We did most of the tile and all of trim work ourselves," Holly said.

A guest bedroom features an old-fashioned spread with Holly's grandmother's Easter bunny sitting

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nearby. "This is a great place for Macy's girls' night weekends with her cousins," Holly said. A plaque commemorating Macy's Easter baptism at the family's Chatfield United Methodist Church hangs proudly on the wall in the hallway.

Macy designed her own bathroom with its turquoise sink and blingy shower curtain. The family repurposed an old cabinet that holds the sink, and the mirror was created from an old window frame. Macy's bedroom, with its paisley spread and hanging dream catcher, also displays her art gallery. She uses the model's form to design dresses, and Holly's old desk serves as Macy's place to do homework. Under the home's eaves is Macy's hideaway room in which she has her guitar and more artwork.

The family stays busy with Macy's school events and pee-wee cheer. Holly serves on the Chatfield-Tupelo Community Center Board. Even when busy, their roads always lead back to the home they've created. A living room plaque says it all: *Our house is just a little house, but God knows where we live.* **NOW**



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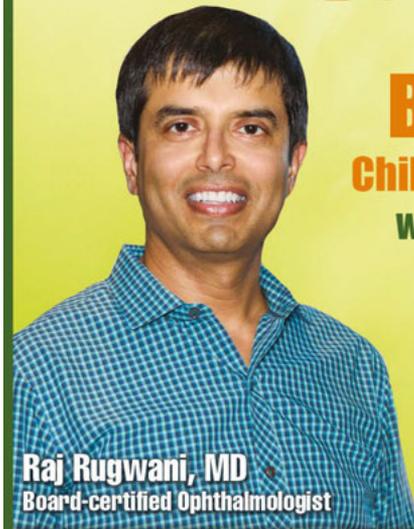
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Bright colors, super cool sunglasses, a cinema room, televisions showing cartoons and a first-ever Summer Dental Camp for Kids are just part of the homey, kid-friendly atmosphere that James Slaughter III, D.D.S., MSD, who has been owner and dentist at Corsicana Pediatric Dentistry for the past year, and his staff have created for their patients and their families. Dr. James' dental practice is dedicated to families, including his own. Dr. James' wife, Jonna, and their two children, Semaj and Soleil, just might be visiting and enjoying one of the many special events and happenings that make Corsicana Pediatric Dentistry such a special place. "We want to build lifelong positive experiences for pediatric dental patients from infancy to age 21," Dr. James stated.

The practice provides an array of dental services including: preventive dentistry, such as exams, cleanings, sealants, sports guards, fluoride and oral cancer screenings; interceptive orthodontics, such as space maintainers, thumb appliances and evaluation of the mixed dentition; sedation dentistry, including nitrous oxide, in-office moderate conscious sedation and treatment under general anesthesia at Navarro Regional Hospital; restorative dentistry, including tooth-colored fillings, same-day treatment with silver- and tooth-colored crowns; advanced technology, such as digital X-rays, imaging and intra-oral pictures; and emergency dentistry, such as trauma to the oral cavity.

Dr. James, a native of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, graduated

from Meharry Medical College School of Dentistry in Nashville, Tennessee, and completed a pediatric dental residency at the University of Louisville, Kentucky. He holds a Texas Dental license as a pediatric dentist and a master's degree in clinical dentistry. He has state certification for the administration of nitrous oxide and Level 2 moderate conscious sedation. Dr. James is a member of the American Dental Association, American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry, Texas Dental Association and the Southwestern Society of Pediatric Dentistry. Corsicana Pediatric Dentistry is a member of the Corsicana & Navarro County Chamber of Commerce.

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Helping Dr. James are eight clinical staff members, all of whom are certified/registered assistants and CPR and/or PALS certified. Dr. James added, "We recognize the responsibility, joy and privilege of serving children." **NOW**

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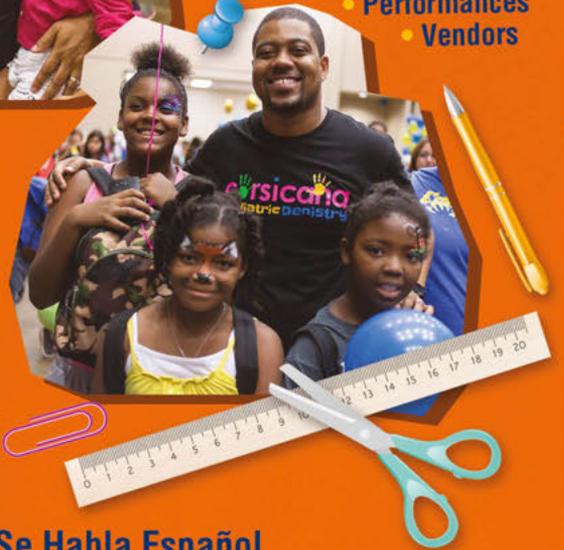
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G.W. Jackson Multicultural Society board members, *David Searcy* and *Nancy Rebal* host the *Juneteenth* closing of artist *Wayne Hall's* art exhibit.



Community National Bank hosts *Judy Sanchez, Flora Gaona* and *Andrea Smithwick* with *Carter Blood Drive*.



Casey Henson and *Shane Widener* are chatting about the start of the *Core* with real estate agent *Tammy Carter* and Chamber President *Joanna Fritz*.



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If you have left your employer and are over age 59 1/2, you don't face the 10-percent federal tax penalty if you take your 401(k) balance as a taxable distribution. You will have to pay taxes on the total amount withdrawn unless part of the funds are Designated Roth Contributions. Beginning at age 70 1/2, required minimum distributions (RMDs) will be necessary for any balance kept in the 401(k) plan. You should consult with your tax advisor before taking a taxable distribution from your 401(k) plan. If you are still employed, the 401(k) plan may limit withdrawals of your account balance even if you are age 59 1/2 or older. **NOW**

Lynda Housley is a State Farm agent based in Corsicana.

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Navarro County Farmer's Market: 7:00 a.m.-noon, Every **Tuesday** and **Saturday**, Downtown Corsicana at the corner of 6th Street and Business I45. Email SusanWilson@susanwilsonmarketing.com.

August 3, 10, 17, 24, 31

Kindermusik Class: 10:15 a.m., Corsicana Public Library. Ideal music development for ages 0-3. Call (903) 654-4810.

August 4

Senior Circle Pot Luck Luncheon: 11:30 a.m.-1:00 p.m., Navarro Regional Hospital. Contact Connie Beal at (903) 654-6892.

August 5

Honor Flight DFW Mission program: 10:00 a.m.-noon, VFW Corsicana. Contact Cory Landrith at (469) 275-8839.

August 6

Pooch Paddle: 2:00-5:00 p.m., Jester Park Pool. Call (903) 875-1060.

August 8-9

Backpacks of Love: 9:00 a.m.-6:00 p.m., 3100 W. Collin St. Visit the group's Facebook page.

August 12

Angels of Corsicana Troop Support packing: 9:00 a.m., 1020 N. Business I45. Call Jean O'Connor at (903) 851-2560 or visit the group's Facebook page.

August 15

Vietnam Veterans of America, Chapter 1009 meeting: 7:00 p.m., La Pradera Restaurant. Email Roy Messick at roy.messick@gmail.com.

August 16

Senior Circle Lunch Bunch: 11:30 a.m., Once Upon A Table, 409 N. Beaton. Contact Connie Beal at (903) 654-6892.

August 17

First day of school.

August 22

Corsicana & Navarro County Chamber of Commerce Quarterly Luncheon: Noon-1:30 p.m., location to be determined. Call (903) 874-4731.

August 23

Senior Circle Lunch and Learn: 11:30 a.m., Navarro Regional Hospital Classrooms. Contact Connie Beal at (903) 654-6892.

August 23, 30

Storytime: 10:00 a.m., Corsicana Public Library. Call (903) 654-4810.

August 24

Corsicana Newcomers' Club meeting: 11:00 a.m., Kinsloe House. Guest speaker will be Susan Gililand, Master Gardener. Contact Annie Avery at (714) 345-6707.

August 28

Corsicana Writers' Guild meeting: 6:30 p.m. Corsicana Public Library. For more information, call (903) 654-4810.

Submissions are welcome and published as space allows. Send your current event details to virginia.riddle@nowmagazines.com.



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In the Kitchen With Nicki Biggs

— By Virginia Riddle

Growing up as the middle child of six children, Nicki Biggs can't remember a time she didn't cook. "Baking is my absolute favorite kind of cooking. I love cooking with vanilla in desserts and sweets," Nicki said. She passed on her techniques to her daughters and is now enjoying teaching her 10-year-old grandson, Aiden, how to cook. "He's getting good at measuring, and he can use the mixer," she said proudly.

Nicki serves as a deaf-education interpreter for Corsicana ISD and the Cowboy Church of Ellis County. However, she's known by friends, family and co-workers as the "pie lady" or "cake lady." "I love sharing what I cook," Nicki explained. "My hope is that everyone enjoys eating it as much as I enjoy making it." **NOW**

A Good Cake!

Note: This recipe can be used with any flavor cake mix and matching flavored vanilla pudding.

Shortening or nonstick cooking spray

Flour for dusting

4 eggs, separated

1/2 cup sugar

1/2 cup vegetable oil

1 cup water

1/2 cup milk

1 Betty Crocker vanilla cake mix

1 1.34-oz. box vanilla pudding (optional)

1. Preheat oven to 350 F. Prepare a 9x13-inch pan by coating bottom and sides with shortening or nonstick cooking spray and dusting with flour; set aside.

2. In a medium-sized bowl, beat the egg whites on high until fluffy. Add sugar, and beat until stiffened; set aside.

3. In a large bowl, combine egg yolks, oil, water and milk; beat on low until mixed well.

4. Add the cake mix; beat. Add the pudding mix;

beat on high 4-5 minutes until smooth.

5. Reduce mixer to low speed. Fold in egg white mixture; scrape the bottom and sides of the bowl to blend mixtures well.

6. Pour the batter into the prepared pan; bake 35-40 minutes or until the cake begins to pull away from the pan's sides, and a toothpick inserted into the center comes out clean.

7. Allow to cool; apply any chosen flavor of frosting.

Hello Dolly Bars

Crust:

1 1/2 cups graham cracker crumbs

1/2 cup sugar

1/2 cup butter, melted

Toppings:

1 1/2 cups pecans, chopped

1 10-oz. pkg. cinnamon chips

1 8-oz. pkg. dates, chopped

1 14-oz. can sweetened condensed milk

1. Preheat oven to 350 F. In a 9x13-inch pan, mix the graham cracker crumbs and sugar. Add the melted butter; mix. Firmly press into pan's bottom.

2. Layer pecans, cinnamon chips and dates on the crust; drizzle the condensed milk evenly over the dates.

3. Bake for 30-35 minutes; cool 15-20 minutes before cutting into squares.

4. Variation 1: Substitute walnuts, butterscotch chips and coconut for the first three topping ingredients.

5. Variation 2: Substitute almonds, white chocolate chips and coconut for the first three topping ingredients.

6. Variation 3: Substitute peanuts, peanut butter & chocolate chip morsels and Chinese noodles for the first three topping ingredients.

Wooden Spoon Bread Pudding

Bread Pudding:

Nonstick cooking spray

5-6 cups bread, cut into 1- to 2-inch cubes

4 eggs

4 cups milk

1 Tbsp. cinnamon

1 cup sugar

1/4 cup vanilla

1 1/2 cups pecans (optional)

Whipping cream, to taste

Caramel Sauce:

1 1/2 cups sugar

1/2 cup water

1 cup cream

3 Tbsp. butter

1. For bread pudding: Preheat oven to 350 F. Prepare dish with nonstick cooking spray; layer the bread cubes.

2. In a large bowl, whisk the eggs; add milk, and stir well until blended.

3. In a small bowl, mix the cinnamon with sugar; add to the milk mixture. Add vanilla.

4. Pour the pecans over the bread crumbs; add the milk mixture, and press the bread, so it soaks up the milk mixture.

5. Let stand for 15-20 minutes before baking. Place in center of the oven; bake for 50-60 minutes or until center has a firm jiggle and an inserted knife comes out clean.

6. For caramel sauce: In a medium-sized heavy saucepan, add sugar and water; heat on medium for 5 minutes, stirring constantly.

7. Continue cooking for another 10 minutes without stirring. When mixture turns to amber, turn off heat; slowly pour in cream; blend with a whisk.

8. Carefully keep stirring; add butter, stirring until it melts.

9. Pour sauce over top of bread pudding; serve warm with whipping cream.

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